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François Brunet (ed.), *L'Amérique des images. Histoire et culture visuelles des Etats-Unis*

Paris: Hazan, in collaboration with Université Paris Diderot Paris 7, 408 pages

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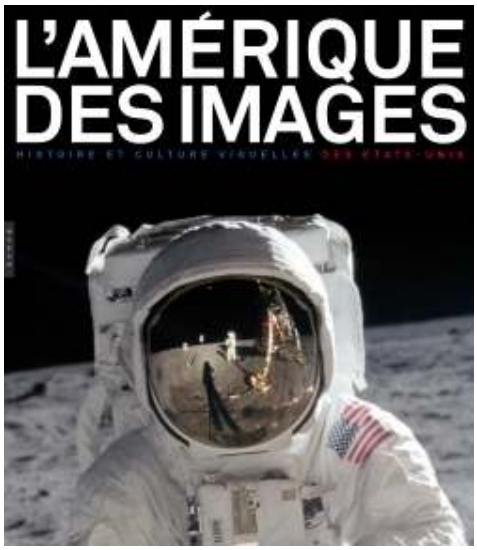

1 To paraphrase Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein in a famous 1966 interview, the American landscape is a landscape of signs. No wonder then that Lichtenstein devoted his entire career to making work that pointed out that all of American life had become an endless series of images. Add to that the United States' position as (still) economic and military superpower, which makes its history and current events inevitable news items on a global scale, as well as the equally super-powerful machine that is the American culture industry – and it is no wonder either that images are what America first and foremost conjures up.

2 Image, or picture? As we are reminded in *L'Amérique des images*, the relationship between the 'visual' image and the 'material' picture situated within a circuit of production, distribution, circulation and reception, informs mental representations – while in turn, the latter impacts socioeconomic exchange. *L'Amérique des images*, however, is not so much a history of representations or one of the making and destiny of images in the United States. Rather, it is an actual history of the American nation through images. Swiftly juggling 'high' art and mass-culture products, documentary images and advertisements, still and moving images, this massive – in both the quantitative and qualitative sense of the term – collaborative work edited by François Brunet reflects the mind-boggling diversity of *made-in-USA* visual items. Not that it is a visual essay entirely: after an overall introduction, the book falls into six chronological sections ranging from the colonial era to the present day. Each section is divided into four chapters on various themes, with one detailed commentary of a specific picture at the end of each chapter. *L'Amérique des images* contains a large amount of crystal-clear text, written mostly by North-American Studies scholars. Each section includes an introductory essay by one of the board of editors (besides Brunet, Géraldine Chouard, Didier Aubert, Jean Kempf, and Anne Crémieux), then followed by an album of full-page reproductions of the pictures discussed in the subsequent essays by the other editors and the contributors. The essays are punctuated by yet other images, reproduced in smaller formats. The picture commentaries face an opposite page showing the image they discuss. Formally and intellectually speaking, the effect is one of admirable balance, coherence and diversity.

3 This collective work, as Brunet puts it, was conceived with the reference of immigrant-oriented 'illustrated dictionaries' in mind. The latter, the editor writes, were used as "abecedaria of American culture" (12). *L'Amérique des images* will no doubt help improve literacy in Americana, offering the francophone readership a long overdue survey of American history through the prism of visual studies.

4 The picture chosen for the book cover (*Buzz Aldrin Moonwalk – Armstrong Reflected in Visor*, 1969) and the one at the very beginning of the book (Charles d'Emery, *Abraham Lincoln's Sculpture under Construction*, 1930s) may seem predictable in a book on American history: the Apollo 11 mission images and Mount Rushmore are established

American icons. Yet, combined with the picture that surprisingly accompanies the opening of Brunet's general introduction – a visual from the TV animated series *Batman* (1992-1995), showing the Dark Knight all cloaked up against a fiery red moon – they can be regarded as a visual preamble to the introduction, and as the book's very program: that is, that history will be reflected upon through images (the Apollo photograph shows Armstrong's *reflection* in Aldrin's helmet); that if U.S. iconic visuals have proven forceful enough to produce an "affinity between America and image," such affinity, to quote the introduction again, "is neither natural nor common [...] it is the product of a history and a culture" (7). And the figure of Batman, millionaire playboy by day, ominous righter of wrongs by night, may very well stand as an allegory to our ambivalent perception of images – enlightening *and* obscuring, instruments of knowledge *and* manipulation; exposing wrongs *and* re-producing the spectacle of violence. To put it briefly, the sequential arrangement of those three images announces one of the book's greatest achievements – that is, to revisit the clichés (no pun intended) on the United States through image-informed thinking. Brunet's introduction lays out the methodological issues at stake in the book, linking the history of American images to the "macro-history" (8) of the United States' foundation and gradual rise to economic and political preeminence and the "micro-history" of the "dynamic relationship" (9) between pictures and the sociopolitical issues of their times.

5 The selection of Obama's *Hope* poster, by Shepard Fairey (2008), conjugated to Brunet's emphasis on the politics of identity, attests to the book's rigorously nuanced view on American history - at times unrelentingly critical of its darkest chapters without self-righteously pointing fingers; constantly evincing a deep, true understanding of American-ness. (One would expect no less from the specialists of American culture, visual arts, film, and history that the contributors are.)

6 The choice of the Obama picture, however, does not only come across as an assessment of how far the United States have come. As Brunet reminds us, the poster is set within a history of forms. It is analyzed as such, which is typical of the book's resolutely transdisciplinary approach, in which art history has its place. Shepard Fairey's image also embodies what Brunet names the "intericonicity" ("*intericonicité*") and "intermediality" ("*intermédialité*") (8) that, he argues, are characteristic of American images inasmuch as they keep quoting and borrowing from previous images as well as other media. So much so, that although ample room is allowed for artistic images in the book, their push and pull relationship to non-artistic media and the significance of what Clement Greenberg might have called the "contamination" of art by the socioeconomic realm is constantly asserted, especially in Jennifer A. Donnelly's great chapter, "Commerce, Art and Image."

7 All types of images are not considered equivalent here, notwithstanding: another forte of the book is its resolute embrace of the history of technologies and the media. Each medium producing "machine-made imagery" (to quote André Malraux) gets fair technical treatment. Such explanations recall how images depend on a production, distribution and circulation process and serve to establish valuable distinctions between the different formats of images discussed – bringing their status as *objects* and industrial products to the fore. For instance, Penny Starfield's reminder (chapter 10) that the cinema relies on the *illusion* of movement given by the "rapid sequence of still images," (180) or Jaime Correa and Crémieux's quick explanation of television

technology (chapter 17), prove very helpful against any simplistic lumping together of all images into the 'moving image' category.

8 The book's first section addresses the emergence of national sentiment and identity. While François Specq's chapter on "colonial heritage" debunks the myth of a Puritan, anti-visual colonial era and young America, Véronique Ha Van's chapter on "representations of the new nation" retraces the history of such American icons as the one-dollar bill and examines the oscillation between the ideas of wilderness and native-American presence and Classical references in the gradual elaboration of a typically American iconography. Brunet's subsequent two chapters, respectively on "the portrait as a democratic art" and "the birth of photography" stress the emphasis on the *individual* as being a distinctive feature of American portraiture. Brunet introduces the crucial role of photography in the democratization of portraiture, as well as the easier circulation of images its developments enabled – allowing for many public figures, from Frederick Douglass to Abraham Lincoln, to become public images as well.

9 Section two, covering the second half of the 19th century, describes the emergence of a typically American visual culture. A whole first chapter by Chouard is thus devoted to "popular arts," with a notable emphasis on textiles and especially their strong symbolic and social functions – a welcome move considering those have long lingered in the limbo of 'minor' art forms. Chapter 6, by Crémieux, presents "images of the West, its exploration and transformations" from the sublime landscapes of Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand to paintings showing the industrial domestication of the wild into a "garden." She casts a critical look on the ideology underlying the compositional choices of photographic pictures of the West (including exclusions of the 'others'. Her focus on George Catling's *Buffalo Hunt, Under the White Wolf Skin* (1844), however, convincingly shows how certain white American artists could prove to be truly knowledgeable of the culture of excluded 'others' such as Native Americans.) Co-written by William Gleeson and Véronique Ha-Van, the following chapter bears on the inevitable topic of "images and memories of the Civil War," rightly called as such (rather than in its French name, which translates as "War of Secession"). The authors show how the exceptional character of the conflicts, among the first technologically advanced ones in world's history, extend to its representations – especially photographical ones. Their point is reinforced by Mark Meigs's commentary on Alexander Gardner's "In The Devil's Den" (published in 1912 in *The Photographic History of the Civil War*), reminding us of the important part of staging and theatricality in Civil War photographs – one first nail driven in the coffin of the myth of photography's truthful rendering of the real, an issue discussed at length in later chapters. Also by Meigs, chapter 8, "The Birth of American museums" provides a valuable introduction to the American museum model and its characteristic relationship to spectacle, entertainment and private funding.

10 The third section, "America goes modern," covers the period between 1890 and the Great Depression, centering on the cultural and social consequences of industrialization. Chapter 9, "The 'visual revolution': the image in the industrial era," by Brunet, gives a detailed account of the period's technological advances in photography and printing and their implications in terms of image practice – with the beginning of ads and the golden age of the postcard, for instance. The tenth chapter, by Starfield, is devoted exclusively to the development of the cinema, from Eadweard Muybridge's experiments to Hollywood's first classics such as D.W. Griffith's formally innovative and heinously racist *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Chapter 11, "Images of

Progress," by Aubert and Véronique Elefteriou-Perrin, provides a survey of the visual representations of industrialization, mechanization, urbanization and their discontents – with a notable paragraph on image-makers' fascination with urban poverty at the turn of the 20th century. Kamila Benayada, a specialist of American art of the first half of the twentieth century, wrote the twelfth chapter, "Images of Modernity." She explores the relationship between technological advances and the elaboration of a typically American visual language – from skyscrapers to photography and painting, with emphases on luminaries like Frank Lloyd-Wright, Alfred Stieglitz and Thomas Hart-Benton, all key actors in the promotion of an American brand of Modernism – albeit in very different ways. Considering how often American figurative Modernism can be slighted, Benayada's subsequent formal commentary on Joseph Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge* (1919-1920) is a most welcome addition to chapter 12.

11 Section 4 spans thirty years, from 1930 to 1960. Entitled "The Era of Propaganda," it seeks to avoid the 'traditional' separation between the thirties and the sixties on account of the rupture brought by World War II, preferring to focus on the 'continuities' of the period and the consolidation of certain 'trends', such as *communicational* uses of the image. In chapter 13, "Communicating Photography," Jean Kempf reflects upon the privileged use of documentary photography to convey sociopolicital messages, especially within the urgent context of the New Deal. Chapter 14, "The Hollywood System," by Eleftériou, points out how Hollywood gradually congealed into the movie industry. It depicts the efforts of avant-garde film-makers like Paul Strand to protest against and resist the increased standardization entailed by the establishment of the Hollywood system. It also presents the latter's contribution to the war effort. The war becomes the focus of chapter 15, written by Guillaume Mouleux, "The War through Images: Visual Propaganda and Representations during World War 2." Not only does Mouleux brilliantly explain the various functions of propaganda images here; he also sets such overly famous icons of American culture as Norman Rockwell's Thanksgiving dinner image in their original context (as the illustration of one of the four "Freedoms" worth fighting for, as voiced in Franklin Roosevelt's 1942 State of the Union Discourse in favor of U.S. involvement in the war). This enables us to cast a fresh, reflexive light upon them. Mouleux also very rightfully links the racist anti-Japanese caricatures from the war period to what can only be referred to as the *tradition* (dare we say, *genre*) of the American racist anti-Black caricature – one only wishes at least one example of such caricatures had been reproduced in the book, on account of how ubiquitous they used to be in the American visual landscape.[1]

12 Aubert's "Middle America," (Chapter 16) provides an excellent counterpoint to the stress on industrialization and urbanization in previous chapters. Elegantly moving from realist and regionalist landscape painting to postcards and contemporary film classics like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, Aubert sheds light on the tension inherent between the myth of the American garden as the core of 'average' America and its sordid underbelly – a point further developed in Aubert's commentary of Robert Frank's *Bar – Detroit*, 1955, a sinister photographic questioning of the value of American icons like George Washington and Lincoln's (reproduced) portraits.

13 Entitled "The Media Empire," section 5 goes from 1960 to 1990. Crémieux defines it as a time of "high contrast," (270) stressing the tremendous economic and technological transformations images underwent and how commercialism and ad culture took over during that time. Chapter 17, as mentioned above, is devoted to television – drafting its

history from transmission experiment into network empire, and revealing its unique blend of conservatism and innovation. Correa and Crémieux most helpfully trace such a specifically American feature back to the equally specific American principle of free economic competition, bringing each TV network to come up with the best to secure their audience.

14 Chapter 18, "Commerce, Art and Images," by Donnelly, gives a well-organized account of the complex relationship between advertising and art in American culture. It suggests how images practices and distribution modes enforce the elaboration of visual culture just as the images themselves (through the much called-for example of blockbuster museum exhibitions). Yet – and this is the (small) criticism one might level against the whole book – her essay somewhat suffers from its synthetic quality. It omits many relevant art works, art practices and artists. Most likely constricted by word count, it sometimes takes shortcuts where further attention is required.[2] But this is a point easily brushed aside considering Brunet's introductory statement regarding the book's mission – to critically open up possibilities for research in the field rather than claiming comprehensiveness.

15 Chapter 19, by Ha-Van, addresses "Transformations in the Public Space," and notably through the development of the highway network, the car culture, and middle class micro-migrations to the suburbs and its effect on impoverished city centers turned ghettoes. Successfully pitting utopian images of road and suburbs development against examples of activist urban-focused artists like Krzystof Wodiczko and land art attempts at reclaiming industrial wasteland, Ha-Van displays the productive 'intermediality' that characterizes the entire book. Even further focused on political art, Chouard and Crémieux's "Activist Images" (Ch. 20) examines the contribution of image-making to the Civil Rights Movement, the cultural revolution of the 1960s, the chicano movement and the conservationist movement (even featuring the unexpected feast of a Georgia O'Keeffe poster making a plea for clean air).

16 The sixth and last section, "Present-Day Interrogations," opens on the traumas of the 2000s – from the September 11 attacks to the Abu Ghraib photographs. Venturing that the visual has become "the structuring medium of contemporary social experience," (335) it reasserts the role of visual studies as one of the most significant tools to develop the visual literacy required in the contemporary age. Consistent with the book's overall attempt at bringing out continuity in American visual practices, Brunet's Chapter 21, according to its title, aims at questioning the notion of "digital revolution." More than an account on the issue, the chapter is a summary of the key issues regarding the digital turn – namely, that of the circulation and manipulation of images digital technologies have only accelerated and facilitated, rather than initiated. Brunet makes the case thanks to the most relevant examples of manipulation in artistic photography (Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, etc.) and early cyber-counterculture. Chapter 22, "Citation, Image, Metamorphoses: Painting and Cinema," by Catherine Marcangeli and Starfield, taps the same vein, providing a good entry into postmodern citational and pastiche aesthetics. Nonetheless, one might have expected to read about and see more of actually *contemporary* visual arts practices, instead of just 1980s-1990s usual suspects like Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Sherrie Levine, *et al*. Granted, they were trailblazers; yet a mention of a painter like John Currin or Lisa Yuskavage (to name only them) might have enriched Marcangeli and Starfield's essay. Also highly focused on visual arts is Meigs's tremendous chapter on the Culture Wars (Ch. 23). Walking us

through their most (in)famous cases (Maya Lin's Vietnam War memorial, Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, Robert Mapplethorpe's retrospective *The Perfect Moment*, the Smithsonian exhibition *The West as America*, etc.), Meigs demonstrates how artistic images in the United States are never completely severed from the sociopolitical realm, and that American reception criteria are definitely not just aesthetic. The concluding chapter of the book, "TV Series: A Parallel World," and the subsequent commentary on *Mad Men*, both by Ariane Hudelet, beautifully echo some of the points ventured in Brunet's general introduction: the permanent American reinvention of its identity thanks to the input of its minorities – true, not without constant struggle – and a demonstration of what thinking about images *through* images means. Considering that American TV series might currently be the artistic medium with the highest concentration of talent, innovation, and critical judgment, ending on TV series serves the book's intentions well. While Hudelet brings up W.J.T. Mitchell's notion of the "meta-image," Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical," or "critical" image, also comes to mind. In this respect, *L'Amérique des images* is also a perfect introduction to the methodology of visual studies, a discipline that has only been fully recognized in France for the past decade.

17 *L'Amérique des images* will no doubt become an inevitable resource for students and a handy one for teachers, or even scholars who are not specialists in any of the many topics and/or periods surveyed here. For a non-academic reader, the book makes for a tremendous reading – or dare we say, seeing – experience. For the Americanist, the book makes us feel like contributing to the endeavor. In other words, this is neither your ordinary encyclopedia, nor your ordinary textbook – and definitely not your ordinary coffee table book: *The America of Images* is a coherent hybrid. And as it reminds us, that is what has made the United States-American.

NOTES

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would have been a welcome addition to the selected bibliography.

2. For instance, although Robert Rauschenberg *did* make commercial art for shop windows (Bonwit Teller's in New York), he did not put out pieces resulting from his high art practice for commercial display (p. 307) and resented the idea of commercial art being put on a par with "artistic" art, as shown through his early reservations against Andy Warhol. Another example is the extremely rapid treatment of Abstract Expressionism/Action painting, with absolutely none of its works reproduced in the book.

In the area of film, it is striking to see that Fritz Lang is only mentioned in passing, with a short allusion to *Fury* (1936), or that Howard Hawks's capital contribution to American cinema goes unnoticed, while a lesser filmmaker like John Huston is repeatedly brought to the fore.

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